

FORESTRY SCIENCE IN THE SERVICE OF MAN



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SONGBIRDS: bring joy to cities

Many city people enjoy songbirds. In fact, a great number of urban residents actually make the effort to encourage birds to visit their yards by providing them with food.

This information on the songbird-related attitudes and behavior of urban residents was recently established in a survey by two Forest Service environmental researchers, Richard M. DeGraaf and Jack Ward Thomas. The men are stationed at the Forest Service's Laboratory in Amherst, Mass.



As part of a special Forest Service research effort to heighten the benefits that urbanites receive from nature, these scientists have been charged with determining if and in what way wildlife is important in metropolitan areas; what wildlife species are most desired and possible in cities; and how urban wildlife habitat can be managed to produce or attract the desired species. The researchers will also develop management programs for various urban wildlife habitats.

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In one phase of their study, they were interested in finding out how willing urban residents might be to practice or pay for practicing wildlife management. They began by sending out questionnaires to 538 randomly selected households in Amherst, Mass. Questionnaires were returned from 367 persons.

From their information, the Forest Service researchers determined that 43% of Amherst householders regularly feed birds. They found that Amherst households maintain an average of 1.7 bird feeders and spend an average of \$8.80 per year on bird feed. They further found that most feeding -- by 91% of those who feed birds -- is done between December and March, when most natural food for wildlife is scarce; and that although most people discontinue feeding as summer approaches, at least some -- 16% of those who feed birds -- still do so in July.

This house in Amherst, Mass., proudly maintains several bird feeders (note arrows).



The researchers estimate that residents of Amherst are spending at least \$19,870. per year feeding songbirds. This expenditure does not take into consideration the purchase of other items that might contribute to a greater enjoyment of songbirds -- such as binoculars, identification guides, or materials for construction of bird houses or feeders. The amount further does not take into account the effort required to construct and erect bird feeders.

What it does give is an insight into the importance of songbirds to the residents of Amherst. This is an insight into an intangible value that would otherwise be impossible to obtain, since as "non-consumptive wildlife," songbirds cannot be evaluated in the same way as game species, for which data is available in returns from hunting licenses or from sales of hunting equipment.

The information about Amherst residents' affinities toward songbird feeding was compared with similar information from the Boston Area that had been obtained by an independent market research agency. In Boston, only 23.8% of the city's 861,024 households reported feeding birds regularly -- much lower than in Amherst. But each bird-feeding household's average feed expenditure in Boston was \$8.20 -- comparable to Amherst expenditures. Based on these figures, Boston residents may spend as much as \$1,680,000. per year on bird feed.

Whether you use the 43% or the more conservative 23.8% figure, it is easy to see that many people are feeding birds. Take the State of Massachusetts, for instance. In the State, there are 1,762,140 households. If 23.8% of these are feeding birds, then in Massachusetts alone, householders are already voluntarily spending \$3,439,000. each year to foster bird populations and, possibly, to realize such intangible returns as the pleasure of a wildlife contact.



Forest Service Wildlife Biologist Richard DeGraaf inspects a bird feeder belonging to an Amherst householder, who took part in the study to determine how willing people are to invite wildlife into their yards.

Birds in Your Backyard

Songbirds require four basic elements for survival -- food, water, shelter, and breeding areas. Other wildlife species have the same basic requirements. If -- in addition to food -- you can provide these other requirements to some extent near your home, you will most assuredly have inviting grounds not only for birds, but for many other types of wildlife that you can enjoy.

FOOD -- Food for songbirds is the easiest life requirement to furnish, because size of the yard is not related to the amount of food you can provide. Your yard naturally yields up earthworms and flickers for robins, while your trees offer insects to woodpeckers. If you wisely keep songbirds in mind during landscaping projects and spring planting, your shrubs and gardens can present any number of luscious seeds, as well as sunflowers to attract goldfinches. If your garden's natural provisions run out, of course, you can always run to the market and restock the area with purchased seeds.

WATER -- Songbirds require water for bathing and drinking. A simple birdbath or garden watering device is usually sufficient for your backyard, but a pool is much more desirable. The environment created by a pool is especially welcome for the seasonal visits of the mallard duck and for the kildeer, a shorebird. Pools support plants in their water, as well as along their edges. These plants include cattails that red-winged blackbirds select as nesting sites.

COVER -- Plants help protect birds from predators and from the weather. Brush piles and dense shrubs provide sufficient cover for towhees, while evergreens are beneficial to chickadees. Many food plants also serve as cover plants.

REPRODUCTIVE AREAS -- All birds need a special kind of vegetative cover in which to reproduce and raise their young. These areas must protect them from the elements and keep them safe from predators. Nesting places must be suited to both high and low-nesting birds. If you have no tall trees in your yard, you might install a bird house. English sparrows, house wrens, or tree swallows will probably use it. Unmowed lawn edges and low shrubs are perfect reproductive sites for song sparrows. While the forks of low trees and shrubs are suited for the nests of robins, dense shrubbery draws cardinals, and high grass near water attracts mallard ducks. Meantime, scarlet tanagers seek out high branches to build their flat stick nests, and Baltimore orioles suspend their basket nests on high branches of mature trees.